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Making the Most of the Time

RONALD J. ALLEN

A prison sits alongside an interstate highway that I regularly travel. I confess that I find the prison depressing, and a little frightening, even in a car going sixty-five miles per hour. The prison is enclosed by three chain link fences, each one ten feet high and separated from one another by bare, stark spaces. Topped with razor wire. Guard towers, and massive brick buildings with tiny slits for windows. Security cameras on every post, and lights as bright as the sun twenty-four hours a day. Such an air of finality.

What would it be like to wake up every morning in such a place? Your cell maybe eight by ten feet? Your life circumscribed by guards and security cameras and personal barbarities that I cannot bring myself to mention in a sermon?

Yet scanning only the first lines of an article on “prison” in the Bible dictionary reveals that prisons were often different in antiquity. We put people in jail either because they have been charged with a crime or because they have been found guilty, and sentenced by a court. In antiquity, however, the reasons for imprisonment were quite diverse, and some are surprising in view of how prisons function today. Chief among the surprises is that civil authorities often confined a person to protect that person against mob action and thereby keep the peace. They also imprisoned people to await trial (though the accused were often released on their own recognizance), for punishment, to await execution, or even as a means whereby jailers could extort money from the prisoner or people who cared about that person. Relatively few people stayed in prisons for long periods of time. Furthermore, few confinements kept people as isolated as prisons do today. Families and friends often had to provide food and other things for prisoners. Some people were simply assigned to house arrest, a situation in which guests could usually come and go.

In his own writings, Paul never says expressly why he was imprisoned.¹ But even if prison back then was not as uniformly harsh as it is today, confinement was still confinement, and the letter to the Colossians assumes that Paul was confined.

Paul interpreted his imprisonment and suffering as a part of the final conflict between God and the powers of evil. Many Jewish and Christian thinkers of that time believed that history was divided into two ages—a present evil age that God would destroy and replace with the new age, the coming realm of God. The early Christians believed that the return of Christ as part of a great apocalypse would be the means whereby God ended the old and put the new in place. Paul thought he was living in the last days of the old age, when the powers of the old age would entrench themselves to resist God’s new world and would

1. Scholars are divided on the question of whether Colossians was written by the historical Paul or by one of Paul’s followers. For a judicious review of current arguments, see Bonnie Bowman Thurston, “The Pauline Tradition: Colossians and Ephesians,” in Dennis Smith, ed., *Chalice Introduction to the New Testament* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 96-98. (The contributors to this Introduction are all members of the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]). Whether or not the historical Paul wrote Colossians, the attitudes towards imprisonment in this letter are consistent with those in the seven undisputed letters from the historical Paul.

intensify the suffering of God's witnesses. Paul's imprisonment is part of the suffering of the last days. This is part of what the apostle means when saying, "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1.24).

Do you see an irony here? The fact that Paul is in prison is a sign of *hope*. The suffering of the apostle means that the great change is already underway.

Paul adds a layer to his interpretation of his imprisonment in today's reading, as he invites the Colossians to "pray for us . . . that God will open for us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly as I should" (Col 4.3-4). Paul then counsels the Colossians to treat respectfully persons outside the church (so as not to create needless barriers to the gospel) but to "[make] the most of the time," or as older translation has it, to "redeem the time."

Paul often uses the word "mystery" not for something that is inscrutable, impossible to understand, but as an almost technical expression for the fact that the turning of the ages is at hand and that when we receive it and live in it, we experience something of the coming realm already shaping and empowering our present. Although we continue to live among the powers of the old age, and they continue to try to imprison us, as Paul says earlier in the letter, "God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the [realm] of [God's] beloved son in whom we [experience] redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1.14). Revealing that message is Paul's purpose—and mine, and yours.

Paul would like for the door of the prison to open so that Paul could "reveal [this message] clearly" in his inimitable missionary style. But if the door does not open to the outside world, then Paul prays for what happens *within* his imprisonment to reveal the gospel clearly. Even in *the cell block* (so to speak), what he says, what he does with his time, how he treats people—all these things can "declare the mystery of Christ."

By extension, Paul wants the Colossians themselves to take full advantage of every moment to reveal the gospel clearly so that its redeeming qualities can become effective immediately in the lives of those who encounter him. The apostle views imprisonment as an opportunity for witness.

Some prisons, of course, exist without a single chain link. I know individuals and communities, and I wager you do also, who feel fenced in, restricted, trapped, as if they are in prison. Perhaps you know a person who is addicted to alcohol or drugs. You see them sitting in a meeting, growing more nervous, their fingers and feet fidgety, their eyes darting from place to place, looking ever more desperate. Then, boom, up and gone, and you know where. Perhaps you know a woman who has experience, excellent skills, and a high degree of motivation, who will never make Vice President because of her gender. Perhaps you know someone trapped in a dead-end marriage. A spouse who is asleep to life, going through the motions, might as well be locked in a cell.

If you are in such situations, or if you relate to family members or friends in such situations, here is Paul's news for you: Christ is already a living presence to help you make the most of the time. Within every circumstance, a person can experience some measure of divine love and solidarity. You can witness to the mystery of Christ in the way that you respond to addiction, in the way that you deal with the disappointment of never making Vice President, in the way you relate to your spouse and children. Every circumstance provides its own opportunities for witness.

I think of some people who have made the most of the time when they were in prison. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was incarcerated for his opposition to Adolf Hitler, and who made the most of his time by writing materials later collected as the now famous *Letters and Papers from Prison*, a book that inspired my entire generation. And when Bonhoeffer knelt to pray before he was executed, Bonhoeffer's humility and sincerity and courage made such an impression upon one of the guards that it never left his mind. Nelson Mandela in South Africa, whose imprisonment itself served to call international attention to the injustice of apartheid.

As I prepare to send the final draft of this sermon to the editor, Darrell Anderson has just returned from Canada. He served a tour of duty in the United States military in Iraq. He went overseas believing that the war was just and would help keep the U.S. free, and would contribute to world peace. But he became disillusioned and concluded that the war actually advances the wealth and power of only a few people, and in reality makes the world more unsafe and violent. He came back from his first tour of duty disillusioned, and when ordered to Iraq for a second time, refused, and fled to Canada. Now that he has returned to the U.S., he will almost certainly be imprisoned. Yet he wants to use the fact of his trial and imprisonment as an occasion of witness.

A few years ago, one of our former students became a prison chaplain, and invited me to lead a Bible study at a women's prison in Indiana. I am embarrassed to say that the last time I had been in a prison was more than fifteen years prior, when I was minister in a local congregation and took my turn from month to month visiting in the county jail on Sunday afternoons. After I passed through a security check, the door shut behind me; the closing of the latch made such a final sound.

Escorted to the room, there were eight or ten women sitting around a table, each with a Bible. I was quite self-conscious and nervous. They wanted to get immediately to the Bible, so after giving our names, that is what we did. As the discussion got underway I was swept up in the questions, the give and take. I don't know when a group has been as well prepared (most had brought notes on the passage). I don't ever remember a group asking better questions or having better insights. And the laughter—I don't know when I have heard any more laughter in a Bible study group.

As I was leaving, I casually asked why these women were incarcerated. The escort explained that each of them was in prison for murder. In each case, they had been caught in an abusive relationship with a male, and in a tense moment they felt completely trapped, and killed. Most of them will spend the rest of their lives behind those high, cold, barbed-wire topped walls. But within its confines, several have earned college degrees, two masters' degrees. They have become a long-term in-house support group. And they try to take care of other inmates.

I don't mean to romanticize their situation. Life in prison is life in prison. And churches today need to be more active not only in ministering to people who are incarcerated, but in pressing for more humane conditions within prisons and for prisons to become more effective instruments of rehabilitation. But within difficult circumstances, these women had experienced the mystery of Christ. At least some of the time and in some ways, they lived as if the door was open. They experienced an aspect of the future in the present, and they found a way to witness to it. They made the most of their time. Indeed, in the older language, they redeemed the time.

If such things happen in prisons, surrounded by chain link fences ten feet high, then they can happen in other forms of imprisonment—such as addiction, dead end jobs, and relationships that have become cell blocks.

What about you? What can you do to make the most of the time? *Your* time?

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